

Levers for Change: Implementing and Sustaining Strengthening Families in States and Counties

Implementing Strengthening Families at a state, county or local level requires engaging the programs and services that already provide support for children and families as partners. States participating in the Strengthening Families National Network have found three key “levers for change” are critical for fully realizing the promise of Strengthening Families.

Using very small investments, these levers can create incentives, capacity and significant momentum to encourage local programs and service systems to use the Protective Factors Framework. The levers create a systemic, scalable and sustainable opportunity to implement the Protective Factors.

The three levers for change are: ■ Parent partnerships ■ Professional development ■ Policy and systems

Parent Partnerships

Leadership from parents at every level ensures that program and practice strategies (a) are responsive and relevant to all kinds of family needs and choices (b) model the relationships among families, service providers, and community resources that can promote the best possible partnership to support children’s development and (c) engage parents as active partners. Partnerships work best when many parents are consistently involved as decision-makers in program planning, implementation and assessment.

Starting points for implementing successful parent partnerships:

- Reach out and partner with existing parent organizations
- Create and maintain prominent leadership roles for parents
- Continually assess what motivates parents to engage in program leadership
- Provide leadership training and support for parent leaders to participate
- Create opportunities for parents to engage with other parents in understanding and using the protective factors in their own families
- Designate specific resources for parent engagement, participation and leadership

Professional Development

Infusing the Protective Factors Framework into training for all people who work with children and families helps build a workforce across disciplines with common knowledge, goals and language. Professionals at every level, from frontline workers to supervisors and administrators, should get training tailored to their roles with a consistent message focused on Strengthening Families.

Starting points for using professional development to implement Strengthening Families:

- Provide orientation and training on Strengthening Families at professional conferences and meetings
- Offer the Protective Factors Framework to current training providers to leverage existing training capacity

- Integrate Strengthening Families research and Protective Factors Framework into university, college, continuing education and certificate programs
- Incorporate Strengthening Families concepts into new worker training
- Develop online training and distance learning opportunities
- Reinforce training with follow-up support, such as reflective supervision and ongoing mentoring

Policies and Systems

Strengthening Families can serve as a platform for coordination across diverse initiatives since it’s based on research used by different disciplines and focuses on goals held in common by several departments and agencies. The Protective Factors Framework provides a bridge for promoting optimal child development AND preventing child abuse and neglect. Regulations and procedures that govern everyday practice are one avenue for creating and reinforcing linkages across agencies using Strengthening Families as a basis for their work.

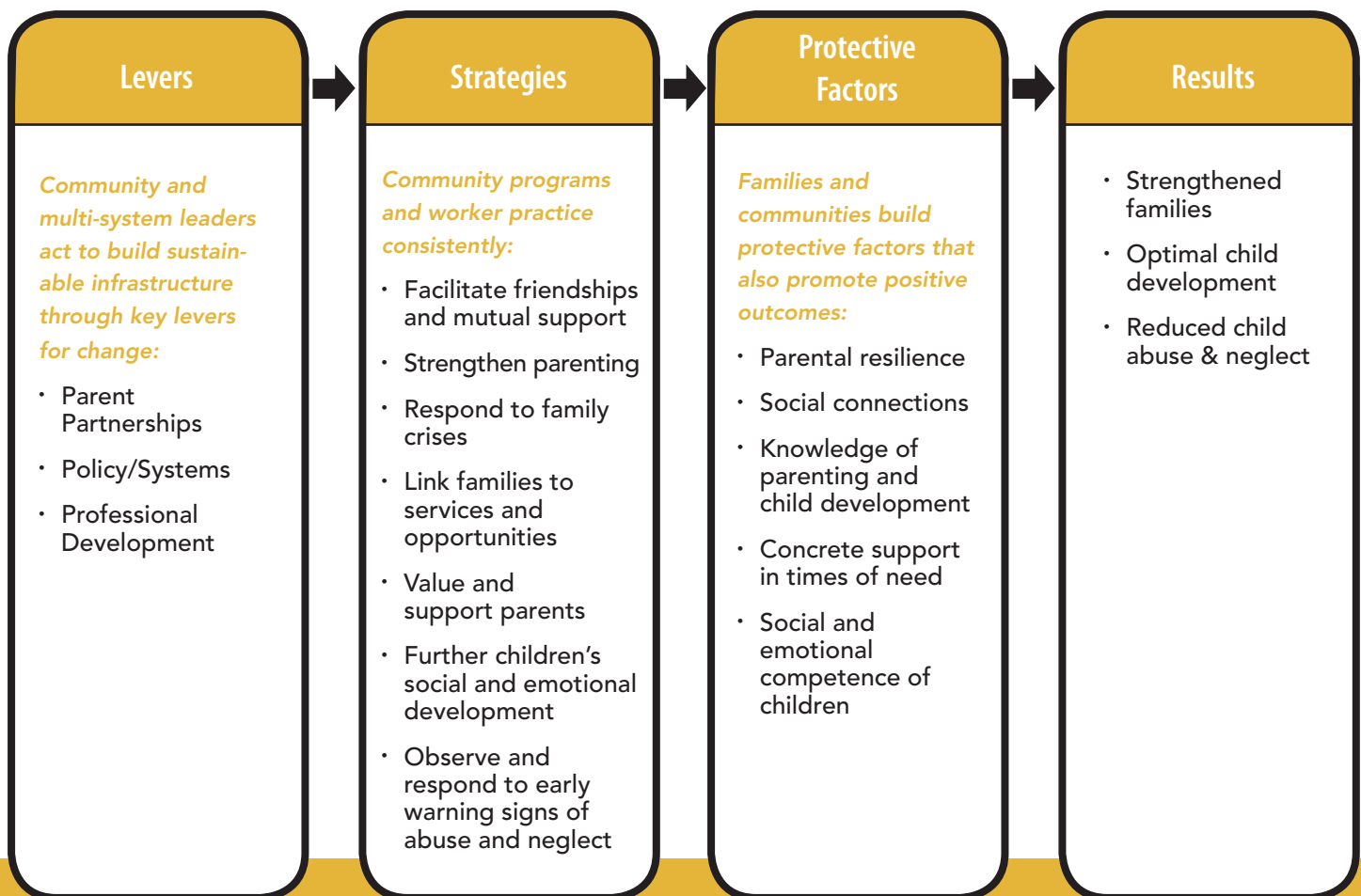
Policy and systems strategies for building collaboration:

- Engage multidisciplinary partners responsible for improving child outcomes and preventing maltreatment in Strengthening Families state leadership
- Use the Protective Factors Framework to define a shared set of desired outcomes for families across systems and disciplines
- Link Strengthening Families to cross-systems planning efforts as a way to implement common language and common goals
- Adapt contracting methods for funding and assessing programs to include a focus on Protective Factors
- Revise job requirements, performance reviews and performance contracts to reflect the Strengthening Families approach to working with children and families

Mobilizing partners, communities and families
to build family strengths, promote optimal
development and reduce child abuse and neglect

The Strengthening Families Approach

- Benefits ALL families
- Builds on family strengths, buffers risk, and promotes better outcomes
- Can be implemented through small but significant changes in everyday actions
- Builds on and can become a part of existing programs, strategies, systems and community opportunities
- Is grounded in research, practice and implementation knowledge



A New Vision

Families and communities, service systems and organizations:

- Focus on building protective and promotive factors to reduce risk and create optimal outcomes for all children, youth and families
- Recognize and support parents as decision-makers and leaders
- Value the culture and unique assets of each family
- Are mutually responsible for better outcomes for children, youth and families

Strengthening Families as a Platform for Collaboration

Collaboration across multiple service systems is central to the Strengthening Families approach. State and local leadership teams for Strengthening Families are made up of multiple agencies and partners, including community and parent leaders. Each represent a unique part of the systems of support that families need. Partnerships have developed because each partner can see a benefit of the Protective Factors to their own work with families, so they are willing to align resources and share leadership for planning and results. These leadership teams have demonstrated that Strengthening Families can be a powerful tool for helping separate elements of support join together as an effective system to achieve outcomes for children and families.

As a comprehensive approach to working with families and not a model program, Strengthening Families is intended to be adapted to different contexts, programs and service systems. This allows each partner to apply the Protective Factors Framework within the context of their own work with children and families – whether that is domestic violence services, family child care, services for children with special needs or others. In addition, because Strengthening Families does not require new funding and can be implemented through low-cost and no-cost innovations, it has helped agencies shape existing resources around common goals. States with no new dollars to spend have built the Protective Factors Framework into existing contracts, requests for proposals, trainings or other vehicles already in place to shape and support collaborative practices.

Strengthening Families also supports family leadership, an arena that has often been a challenge for formal service systems. The Protective Factors Framework applies to all families and focuses on building strengths, which offers a positive starting point for family engagement. Program strategies built on the framework are intended to be adapted to the cultures, traditions and values of participating families, since Protective Factors are built and expressed differently in different contexts. Many tools and concrete examples for building parent leadership and engaging families as partners have been developed through Strengthening Families initiatives around the country.

The Strengthening Families approach to collaboration, using the common language of research-based Protective Factors to describe results for families across systems, has led to:

- Better understanding of the role that each service system – both administrators and practitioners – plays in supporting families
- More effective partnerships among agencies and among individual workers
- A professional development system that fosters collaboration by creating a common language and common approach across disciplines
- Greater appreciation for the significant role that non-governmental community resources like informal networks, churches, social groups and cultural practices play in building protective factors with families
- Consistent, positive messages about building on strengths that encourage family engagement and partnerships
- Greater cumulative impact on results for both children and their families across systems

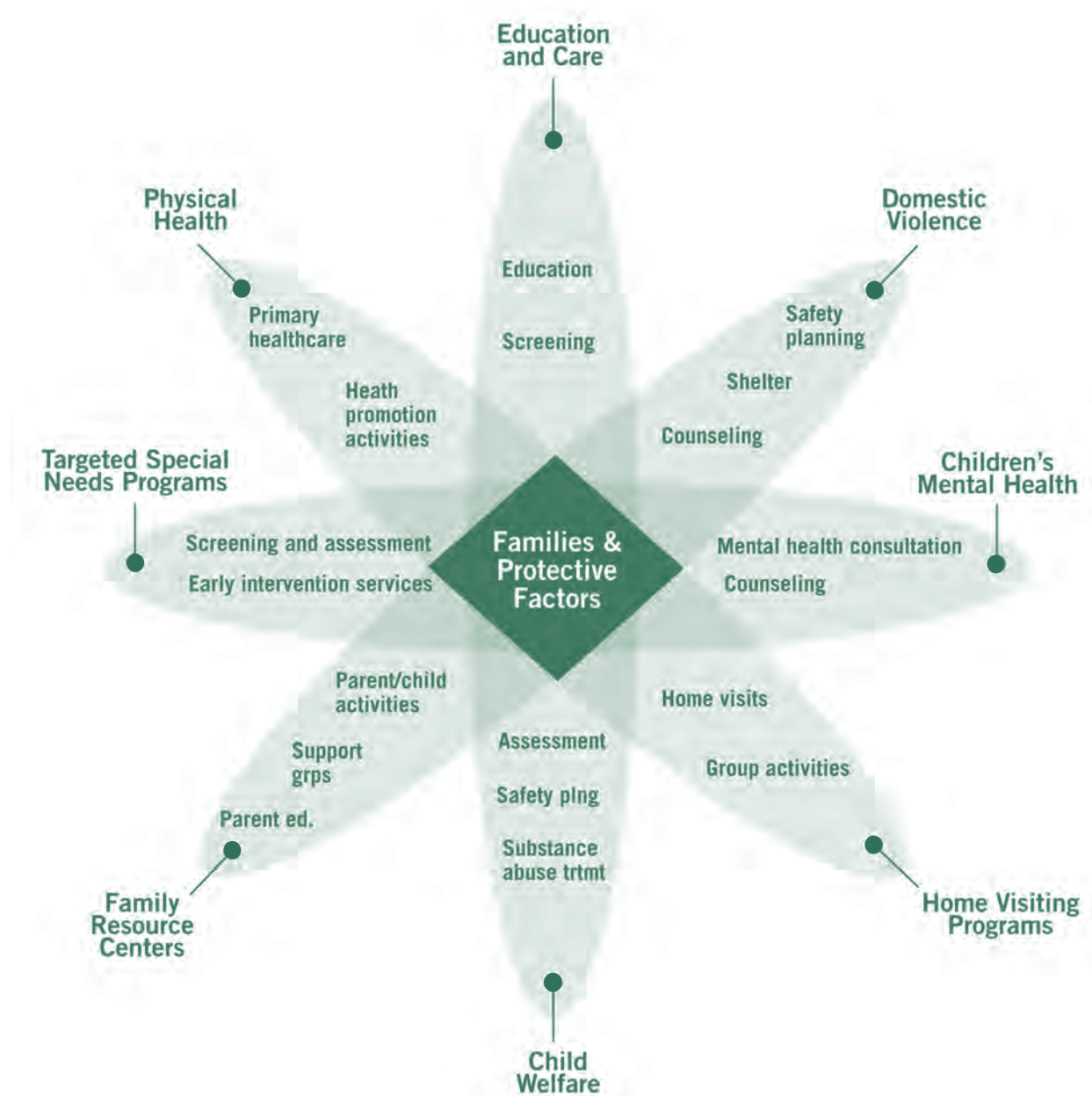
Strengthening Families as a Platform for Collaboration

State leadership teams have used the Strengthening Families framework to show how all parts of a system are linked through efforts to build protective factors with families.

Diverse agencies and programs are responsible for specialized parts of the system, but all of them focus some aspect of their work on families. Their goals intersect in the need to create a strong partnership with families and to support the family's role in promoting their children's development.

The Protective Factors Framework combines familiar research findings that already guide policies and practices into a comprehensive approach to supporting families. The framework offers a common language to describe what all families need regardless of which part of the system they touch:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Social and Emotional Competence of Children



What We Know: Families thrive when protective factors are robust in their lives and communities.

Using the Strengthening Families Approach, more than 30 states are shifting policy, funding and training to help programs working with children and families build protective factors with families. Many states and counties also use the Protective Factors Framework to align services for children and families, strengthen families in the child welfare system and work in partnership with families and communities to build protective factors. For more information and many tools and options for implementation, visit www.strengtheningfamilies.net.

Nationally, Strengthening Families is coordinated by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and supported by national partner organizations including:

- Child Welfare Information Gateway
- The Finance Project
- FRIENDS National Resource Center
- The National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds
- Parents As Teachers
- United Way Worldwide
- ZERO TO THREE

The Protective Factors Framework

Five Protective Factors are the foundation of the Strengthening Families Approach: parental resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social and emotional competence of children. Research studies support the common-sense notion that when these Protective Factors are well established in a family, the likelihood of child abuse and neglect diminishes. Research shows that these protective factors are also "promotive" factors that build family strengths and a family environment that promotes optimal child and youth development.

Parental Resilience

No one can eliminate stress from parenting, but a parent's capacity for resilience can affect how a parent deals with stress. Resilience is the ability to manage and bounce back from all types of challenges that emerge in every family's life. It means finding ways to solve problems, building and sustaining trusting relationships including relationships with your own child, and knowing how to seek help when necessary.

Social Connections

Friends, family members, neighbors and community members provide emotional support, help solve problems, offer parenting advice and give concrete assistance to parents. Networks of support are essential to parents and also offer opportunities for people to "give back", an important part of self-esteem as well as a benefit for the community. Isolated families may need extra help in reaching out to build positive relationships.

Concrete Support in Times of Need

Meeting basic economic needs like food, shelter, clothing and health care is essential for families to thrive. Likewise, when families encounter a crisis such as domestic violence, mental illness or substance abuse, adequate services and supports need to be in place to provide stability, treatment and help for family members to get through the crisis.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations for children's behavior at every age help parents see their children and youth in a positive light and promote their healthy development. Information can come from many sources, including family members as well as parent education classes and surfing the internet. Studies show information is most effective when it comes at the precise time parents need it to understand their own children. Parents who experienced harsh discipline or other negative childhood experiences may need extra help to change the parenting patterns they learned as children.

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

A child or youth's ability to interact positively with others, self-regulate their behavior and effectively communicate their feelings has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults, and peers. Challenging behaviors or delayed development create extra stress for families, so early identification and assistance for both parents and children can head off negative results and keep development on track.